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ABSTRACT

Asserting that the welfare reform proposals of the mid-1990s drew attention to the problem of domestic violence among individuals receiving public assistance who are among the poorest of the poor, this report examines what is known from past research on domestic violence that may inform policies related to marriage and child well-being. In addition, the report highlights areas for future research, and strategies that can advance stable marriages and improve the well-being of children who otherwise might suffer the effects of domestic violence. The report examines research on: (1) prevalence and correlates of domestic violence among women on welfare; (2) effects of domestic violence on child well-being; and (3) marriage and domestic violence. The report then assesses the implications for welfare policy and future research. Policy implications include: (1) early disclosure of abuse should be encouraged; (2) abuse among youth may need special consideration; (3) young children could benefit from early intervention and skills training; (4) coordination between child protective services and domestic violence organizations is important; (5) increased income support strategies may make women less vulnerable to abuse; (6) increased investments in low-income men may be necessary; and (7) addressing attitudes about domestic violence could be useful. (Contains 41 endnotes.) (EV)

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RESEARCH FORUM ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND THE NEW FEDERALISM

Domestic Violence and Welfare Policy

Research Findings That Can Inform Policies on Marriage and Child Well-Being

Sharmila Lawrence

December 2002

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Introduction

For some time domestic violence has been recognized as an issue with profound implications for our society. Recently, evidence has accumulated to document in particular the effects of domestic violence on poor families. The welfare reform proposals of the mid 1990s drew attention to the problem of domestic violence among individuals receiving public assistance who are among the poorest of the poor.

With the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996—the welfare legislation that replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)—provisions were included to allow exemptions from work requirements for victims of domestic violence. Considerable research prior to 1996 and subsequently has produced relevant findings about the impact of domestic violence on employment and self-sufficiency. This research has also highlighted factors which complicate identifying and assessing the existence of domestic violence, most often related to the reticence of the victim to discuss the problem for very personal reasons.

Current PRWORA reauthorization efforts have continued and expanded a focus on employment and self-sufficiency, but have also increased a focus on child well-being and marriage. Child well-being and marriage formation are subjects that are intricately related to stable relationships between adults interested in rearing healthy and happy children.

This report examines what is known from past research on domestic violence that may inform policies related to marriage and child well-being. In addition, it highlights areas for future research and strategies that can advance stable marriages and improve the well-being of children who otherwise might suffer the effects of domestic violence.

The report will examine research on:

- Prevalence and correlates of domestic violence among women on welfare
- Effects of domestic violence on child well-being
- Marriage and domestic violence

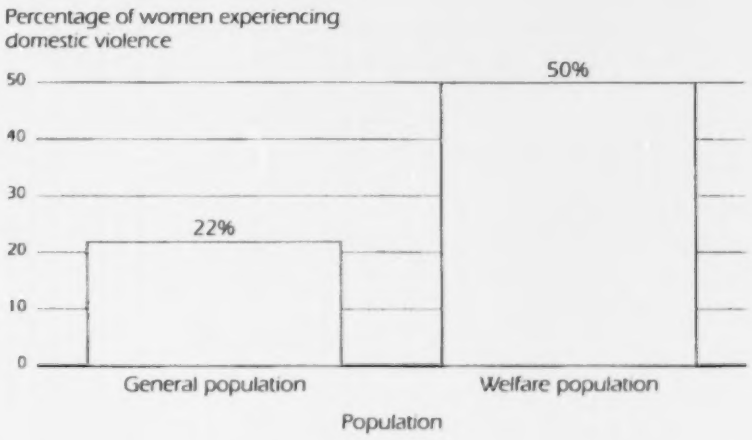
It will then assess the implications for welfare policy and future research.

Domestic Violence Among Women on Welfare

The American Medical Association defines domestic violence or 'intimate partner abuse' as "the physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse to an individual perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner."[1]

There is growing recognition of the high incidence of domestic violence among women on welfare as several studies of TANF recipients have demonstrated. While among the general population about 22 percent of women have experienced domestic violence in their adult lives, this figure doubles when applied to women on welfare.[2] Most studies of women on welfare find lifetime prevalence of domestic violence ranging from 34 to 65 percent, with most rates in the 50 to 60 percent range. Rates of recent or current physical violence generally range from 8 to 33 percent.[3] In addition, many of these studies also document a high prevalence of physical and sexual abuse during childhood.[4]

Figure 1: Lifetime Prevalence of Domestic Violence



Sources: Lyon, E. (2000). *Welfare, Poverty, and Abused Women: New Research and Its Implications* (Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence No. 10). Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence, National Resource Center on Domestic Violence <http://www.vawnet.org/vni/library/general/BCS10_POV.htm>; and Tolman, R. & Raphael, J. (2000). A Review of Research on Welfare and Domestic Violence. *Journal of Social Issues*, 56(4), pp. 655-682.

The CalWORKS two county research project, which tracks 880 female CalWORKs participants in Kern and Stanislaus counties in California, reports the highest rates of domestic violence for women on welfare. The study finds that 80 percent of the women participating have experienced domestic violence during their lives, some in multiple relationships.[5]

One reason that these studies on the prevalence of domestic violence report widely disparate rates is the lack of an accepted universal typology for categorizing and measuring abuse. The Conflict Tactics Scale[6] is the most commonly used instrument to measure physical violence between intimate partners. However, studies may use different items on the scale to measure abuse that can lead to variation in results. In addition, while physical violence rates tend to be most commonly measured and comparable across studies, other types of abuse, such as verbal, sexual, psychological, or economic abuse are not always measured.[7] Thus studies utilizing a more comprehensive definition of domestic violence are likely to yield higher prevalence rates.

Despite these measurement problems, there is a growing body of evidence indicating a higher prevalence of domestic violence among the welfare population.[8] This suggests that poverty may increase women's vulnerability to abuse. In this context, welfare becomes an important economic resource for women seeking to escape abuse. Preliminary research indicates that women may use welfare strategically as a response to abuse by their partners.[9]

While research findings indicate a high incidence of domestic violence among TANF recipients, disclosure of this situation to welfare caseworkers remains low. State data indicate that between 5 to 10 percent of the caseload disclose abuse. Such a low disclosure rate has been attributed to shame, fear, and a lack of trust.[10]

There is limited research on differences in rates of abuse by age among women on welfare. However, national surveys indicate that domestic violence is higher among younger women between the ages of 16 and 24.[11] The CalWORKS Project study found a higher rate of domestic violence among younger women. In the sample, 58 percent of those under age 25 had been in a violent relationship in the last year.[12] A study undertaken by the Center for Impact Research found higher rates of domestic violence among young teens as compared to young women aged 20 to 21. The study examined 474 teen welfare mothers in Chicago between the ages of 11 and 21. The study found that 62 percent of the girls in the sample between ages 11 and 15 had experienced domestic violence by their boyfriends in the previous year compared to 56 percent of those between ages 16 and 19 and 47 percent of those aged 20 to 21. The study also found that younger girls with older boyfriends and girls whose boyfriends lacked a high school diploma were more likely to experience domestic violence. Lastly, the study examined domestic violence and sabotage of birth control efforts—instances where boyfriends attempted to undermine the birth control use of their girlfriends. Of those teens reporting domestic violence, 66 percent also reported experiencing birth control sabotage, and the severity of the sabotage increased with the severity of the domestic violence.[13] While the findings from this study may not be generalizable due to the small sample size and the nonrepresentative sample, it suggests the need for more research to determine whether this pattern of greater domestic violence among younger women on welfare is found in other samples. More research is also needed on the influence of partners' age and on the prevalence of birth control sabotage both among younger and older women on welfare.

As noted earlier, the majority of abused women on welfare have reported experiencing varying degrees of physical and sexual abuse during childhood. In addition, many studies indicate that women on welfare who experience domestic violence have higher rates of mental and physical health problems. Particularly, studies have found that battered women on welfare suffer from much higher rates of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder than women who have not been abused. Research also indicates that women whose abuse is recent suffer higher rates of depression compared to those with past abuse.[14]

In terms of drug and alcohol abuse, research findings show that individuals experiencing physical violence are more likely to report drug and alcohol problems compared to those who do not experience such violence.[15]

While domestic violence often results in serious health effects for women, the research also indicates that the impact of abuse on physical and mental health and substance abuse can diminish over time and is most intense when the violence has been recent. The Women's Employment Study found that women who had reported severe physical violence in the past year were more likely to be dependent on alcohol or drugs compared to those whose abuse occurred in the past.[16]

Research has also linked domestic violence to homelessness. A range of studies indicates that 18 to 50 percent of homeless women and children report having left their homes due to domestic abuse.[17] These studies are not necessarily representative of women on welfare as they focus only on those in shelter populations. However, recent data from the Women's Employment Study reveal that women who have experienced recent, severe, and persistent domestic violence are more likely to experience homelessness, be on welfare, and have lower wages and lower economic well-being than women who experience less severe abuse.[18]

Research indicates that between 3.3 million and 10 million children are exposed to domestic violence annually in the United States.

Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

While there has been little research examining the effects of domestic violence specifically on children in the welfare population, there is a growing body of evidence about the effects of domestic violence on children in general, which is informative. Research indicates that between 3.3 million and 10 million children are exposed to domestic violence annually in the United States.[19] This exposure can take many forms—from watching or listening to abuse, attempting to intervene, or witnessing the effects of abuse on the mother.[20]

Current research also reveals that domestic violence and child maltreatment very often occur together. It is estimated that in 30 to 60 percent of families experiencing one form of abuse the other is also present.[21] One study examining a national sample of 775 battered women with children found that in 70 percent of the families with children the batterer also abused the children. In addition, the more severe the abuse of the woman, the more severely the child was abused. In this study the children were biologically related to the batterer.[22] Other studies have found that the presence of children not biologically related to the abuser put women at greater risk for being abused, and that the presence of a step-parent increased the risk that children would be abused.[23] However, more research is required to determine whether there is any valid difference in rates of abuse perpetrated by biological versus stepparents.

Research regarding child abuse by battered women remains fairly limited. A national survey of 6,000 American families revealed that women who were abused were twice as likely to abuse their children compared to women who were not abused.[24] Other research indicates that mothers are more likely to abuse their children while they are in an abusive relationship rather than after they have left a violent relationship.[25] However, a more thorough understanding of the link between battered women and child abuse is still lacking and requires more research.

Much research demonstrates that serious negative effects on child development result from children's exposure to domestic violence.[26] Children of all ages are affected. Infants exposed to violence can in some circumstances suffer from 'failure to thrive' syndrome and may not develop attachments to their caregivers. Preschool and school-age children may suffer behavioral problems such as aggression, anxiety, sleeplessness, depression, low self-esteem and low levels of empathy. In terms of cognitive development, studies find that children exposed to domestic violence experienced difficulty in concentrating and scored lower on verbal, motor, and cognitive skill measures. In cases of severe domestic violence, children may exhibit symptoms similar to posttraumatic stress disorder such as emotional numbing and avoidance of any reminders of the incident. Adolescents who grow up in violent homes are at risk of engaging in abusive relationships. These negative effects can also carry into adulthood, resulting in depression, violence in the home, and criminal behavior.[27]

The presence of child maltreatment along with domestic violence compounds the negative effects on children. Studies indicate that children exposed to both domestic violence and

Figure 2: Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

Age group	Effects
Infants	'Failure to thrive;' may not develop attachments to caregivers
Preschool and School-age Children	Aggression; anxiety; depression; sleeplessness; low self-esteem; low levels of empathy; lower scores on verbal, motor, and cognitive skill measures
Adolescents	Risk of engaging in abusive relationships

Sources: Carter, L., Weithorn, L. & Behrman, R. (1999). Domestic Violence and Children: Analysis and Recommendations. *The Future of Children*, 9(3), pp. 4-20; and Carter, L. & Schechter, S. (1997). *Child Abuse and Domestic Violence: Creating Community Partnerships For Safe Families*. San Francisco, CA: Family Violence Prevention Fund <http://www.mincava.umn.edu/link/fvpf1.htm>.

child maltreatment have more negative outcomes compared to children exposed only to one form of violence.[28]

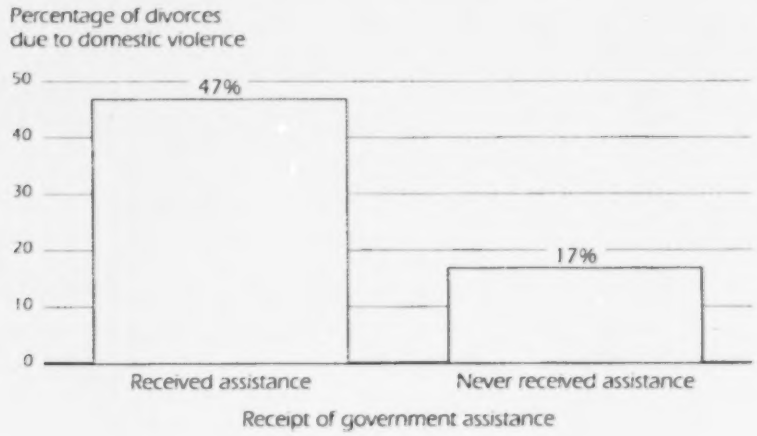
The effects of domestic violence on children may also be reflected in the parenting practices of battered women and abusers. A parent's ability to play a stable role in a child's life while experiencing trauma may be compromised. In addition, a batterer may teach that violence is an acceptable means to resolve conflict. While research on the effects of domestic violence on parenting is limited, there is some evidence that battered mothers may be less emotionally available to their children, due to depression and trauma resulting from the violence.[29] In some instances, the neglect or abuse may be the result of battering. For example, an abuser may prevent a mother from taking the children to the doctor for fear of exposing the violence.[30] However, a few studies examining the concerns battered women have for their children's safety indicate that battered women take many steps to protect their children, including leaving batterers for the sake of the children. In other instances, it is concern for the children that leads many women to remain with abusers, due to a need for financial support for their children.[31]

A major problem in the past has been the failure of Child Protective Services (CPS) and domestic violence organizations to work together to address the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child maltreatment. In many instances, battered women have been held responsible for a 'failure to protect' their children, despite being the victims of domestic abuse. Recently, however, more collaborative efforts forged between CPS and domestic violence prevention advocates have been proposed with the recognition that the ability of the mother to protect her child depends on her own safety. Approaches include screening for domestic violence in all child maltreatment cases, having domestic violence advocates on CPS staff to provide guidance, and cross field training for CPS agencies and domestic violence organizations.[32]

Marriage and Domestic Violence

The focus of welfare reauthorization debates on marriage and child well-being is supported by research findings that link child well-being to family structure. Research indicates that outcomes for children are best with two biological parents in a low-conflict marriage.[33] It is not just the presence of two parents that leads to better outcomes for children but also the presence of a nonconflictual marriage. Research also indicates that the greater the number

Figure 3: Respondents Attributing Divorce to Domestic Violence



Source: Data from: Johnson, A.; Stanley, S.; Glenn, N.; Amato, P., Nock, S.; Markman, H.; & Dion, R. (2002). *Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce.* Oklahoma City, OK: Oklahoma State University, Bureau for Social Research.

of family transitions that children experience, the more detrimental the effect on their well-being, particularly for adolescent girls. Sample data from the Three-City Study examining changes in children's living arrangements in low-income families found no increase over time in the percentage of children living with two biological parents despite an overall increase in children living with two adults. Most of the latter increase involved the mother cohabiting with a man other than the child's biological father. Moreover, 42 percent of these cohabiting relationships had ended by the second interview 16 months later. In addition, 18 percent of the women who were married had either separated or divorced by the time of the second interview.[34] Since studies indicate that children's well-being is no greater on average in such mother-stepfather families than in single-parent families, encouraging and supporting stable marriages among biological parents is important.

Domestic violence has a clear impact on the quality and stability of marriage. The Oklahoma Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce illustrates the extent to which domestic violence can affect marriage. Some 30 percent of the respondents cited domestic violence as a reason for their prior divorce. In addition, the survey found that 47 percent of respondents who ever received government assistance cited domestic violence as a reason for prior divorce compared to 17 percent of those who never received assistance.[35] These data are consistent with research findings that indicate a higher prevalence of domestic violence among the welfare population.

The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) evaluation found that domestic violence rates among participants were over 50 percent. The findings from MFIP also indicated that increasing employment and earnings with appropriate financial incentives could lead to a decrease in domestic violence and also result in a slight increase in marriage.[36] These findings suggest that women with more employment and income may be less vulnerable to abuse and able to make different choices concerning marriage.

Past research has also indicated that one of the problems related to low marriage rates may be a lack of "marriageable men" among the welfare population due to high rates of incarceration for nonviolent crimes, unemployment, and low levels of education. The Fragile Families study found that more than 25 percent of unmarried fathers were unemployed at the time of their child's birth.[37] Problems with mental health, substance abuse, and propensity for violence can also affect the 'marriageability' of men. However, more research is required to assess the true prevalence of these problems among low-income populations.

In terms of propensity for violence, there has been little research specifically examining batterers among low-income populations. However, past research on the characteristics of batterers in intervention or treatment programs have revealed some of the risk factors associated with perpetration of abuse. While substance abuse can increase the risk that men will batter, there are a host of other factors that link substance abuse to partner violence. Research indicates that these factors include: (1) past exposure to violence and substance abuse in the family, (2) low education and income levels, (3) beliefs about the acceptability of violence against women, (4) belief that substance use makes people violent, (5) depression, and (6) marital conflicts.[38]

Policy Implications

The scope of marriage promotion policies should include a broad array of programs and services that address the multiple risk factors that lead to marital instability among low-income families. The following specific policy options could address some of these issues and in turn lead to healthier relationships that would ultimately improve child well-being.

1. **Early disclosure of abuse should be encouraged.**
   Low disclosure rates to caseworkers, coupled with the high prevalence of domestic violence among TANF recipients, is a serious problem and should be taken into consideration in designing policies to promote marriage and improve child well-being. If not, women in abusive relationships who have not disclosed abuse may be inadvertently encouraged to stay with their partners. Creating a safe and receptive environment for women to disclose abuse within welfare offices is important. The findings on severity and current versus past violence also reinforce the importance of identifying abuse early and providing adequate services as quickly as possible.

2. **Abuse among youth may need special consideration.**
   While there is limited research on the difference in prevalence of domestic violence by age, there is some evidence that rates of abuse are higher among younger women. In addition, the study on birth control sabotage among teens raises some questions about control over sexual and reproductive decisions for young girls. If these results are replicated, they suggest the importance of addressing issues of domestic violence and sexual abuse in teen pregnancy prevention programs.

3. **Young children could benefit from early intervention and skills training.**
   Research on the early effects of domestic violence on very young children and the cyclical nature of domestic violence (propensity for children who grow up in violent homes to engage in abusive relationships) underscores the need to start interventions early and to take a two-generation approach in addressing domestic violence. While there is limited

research on the effectiveness of conflict resolution and antiviolence programs in domestic violence prevention, there is a growing body of research on promising antiviolence and peace programs for elementary school children. These programs have been found to have positive effects in decreasing violence and aggression and increasing resilience to violence. According to the studies, an effective violence prevention program should be comprehensive and focus on promoting social norms against violence, improving interpersonal problem solving, and helping children to establish peaceful relationships.[39] In addition, special attention should be paid to children identified as having witnessed family and community violence. Creating and testing similar comprehensive programs that teach students about domestic violence and alternative conflict resolution tactics could be valuable in addressing issues of domestic violence early in life.

4. **Coordination between CPS and domestic violence organizations is important.**
Linkages between child protective services and domestic violence workers are essential for breaking the cycle of violence earlier, given the tremendous impact of domestic violence on child well-being. It is important not to simply remove children from the home where domestic violence exists but to work with the mother to provide her with the options to make safe choices. One researcher points out that, for many low-income women, violence may not be the major concern given the combination of other threats such as poverty, lack of health care, housing issues, poor schools, and dangerous neighborhoods. In this context, ensuring safety for battered women and children may need to go beyond just violence intervention and encompass adequate housing, income, physical health, and mental health care.[40] Given the implications for parenting and child well-being, such interventions are critical.

5. **Increased income support strategies may make women less vulnerable to abuse.**
The findings from the Minnesota Family Investment Program suggest that women with more employment and income are less vulnerable to abuse and may make different decisions about marriage. Marriage promotion and child well-being policies could be enhanced by the inclusion of such income support strategies.

6. **Increased investments in low-income men may be necessary.**
While the findings on the characteristics of batterers among low-income populations are not yet conclusive, early findings on the 'marriageability' of men suggest that investments in low-income men in terms of job training and education may help to increase marriage rates by addressing problems of economic insecurity. In addition, investments in mental health and substance abuse services may help in combating domestic violence. Without addressing these larger problems that affect the stability of relationships and the quality of marriage, outcomes for parents and children may not improve.

7. **Addressing attitudes about domestic violence could be useful.**
As noted earlier, the research on batterers also finds a correlation between belief in the acceptability of violence against women and perpetration of domestic violence. Thus it appears important to address attitudes about domestic violence and gender stereotypes. There is evidence that larger public awareness campaigns targeted at adults have had some success in changing people's perceptions about domestic violence.[41] Similar campaigns directed to the welfare population within the context of marriage policies could also be useful.

Programs that apply these policies could include:

- Income support strategies to provide increased assistance to low-income families, including housing and access to physical health and mental health services
- Job training, education, and mental health and substance abuse services for low-income men
- Creating more receptive environments for disclosure of abuse
- Support services for domestic violence victims and children
- Collaborative programs between child protective services and domestic violence service providers to detect violence early and ensure the safety of mothers and children
- Teen pregnancy prevention programs that address domestic violence and sexual abuse
- Comprehensive antiviolence and conflict resolution curricula in schools that address domestic violence
- Public education campaigns addressing attitudes about domestic violence

Future Research Questions

While some states have instituted marriage incentive policies as part of TANF, little or no research exists on effective marriage promotion policies among the welfare population. Future research in this area is necessary in order to design appropriate programs.

There remain several specific issues that warrant more research and could help in the design of appropriate services and interventions. These issues include:

- What are the characteristics of batterers in the low-income population?
- Are there differences in the rates of domestic violence found among perpetrators who are biologically related to the child and stepparents? Does the perpetrator's biological relationship to the child modify the impact of domestic violence on children?
- What are the effects of domestic violence specifically on children in the welfare population?
- How is parenting affected by domestic violence?
- Are there differences in prevalence of domestic violence by age among the welfare population?
- What is the prevalence of domestic violence among teen mothers on welfare?
- What is the relationship of domestic violence to birth control sabotage? What role does birth control sabotage play in nonmarital child bearing?
- What kinds of investments are needed in low-income men to prevent domestic violence? Are interventions that improve employment and education levels effective in making men 'marriageable'? Are investments in substance abuse and mental health services effective in reducing domestic violence?
- What types of conflict resolution programs and curricula would be most effective in addressing domestic violence in schools?
- What kinds of public education campaigns are most effective in changing perceptions on domestic violence among the welfare population?

Ultimately, policies aimed at encouraging healthy marriages and promoting child well-being would be enhanced by designing appropriate interventions to address and prevent domestic violence among the welfare population.

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The Research Forum, an initiative of the National Center for Children in Poverty, hosted at the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, encourages collaborative research and informed policy on welfare reform and vulnerable populations. The Research Forum's ultimate goal is to identify and promote strategies that protect and enhance the well-being of poor children and their families.

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